

A CONVERSATION WITH MAM OLGA

In 1974 Alejandra and I took 10 students from New England College to do their January Term in Kom Cheen, Yucatan. The idea was to have these students live with families in town in order to have the experience of living like a Mayan for four weeks.

In order to prepare these students for the experience we had them come to our house in Deering, New Hampshire all during the Fall semester. We not only taught them the basics of the Mayan language but also talked about the various cultural aspects of living with a Mayan family.

When the students arrived in Kom Cheen we took them to the various homes which had offered to take them in. After explaining something about each family one of the students would volunteer to stay there and then we would march on to the next host family. We came to Mam Olga's house, a family which had five daughters and two sons, some of whom were about the age of the students. The one boy in our group whom we did not know, Tom, who went to a different college but who had a sister in our student group, volunteered to stay with this family.

Later in the afternoon Alejandra and I set out to visit with the various host families to see how things were going along. When we got to Mam Olga's house she had all sorts of questions for us. It turned out that Tom could speak neither Spanish nor of course had he learned Mayan since he did not join us in our classes during the Fall, so there was very little communication.

Right off Mam Olga starts by asking the boy's name. I didn't know his name either nor anything else about him. So the conversation went like this:

MO: Bix u kaba le xibpalo?

What's the name of the boy?

DB: What's your name?

Tom: Tom.

MO: Bixi? Ton?¹

How's that? Penis?

Girls: Titter titter titter.

MO: Om bey. Tuux u cahal?

Oh okay. Where does he live?

DB: Where do you live?

Tom: Near Boston.

DB: Naə ti Boston.

Near Boston.

MO: Bixi? Box ton?

How's that? Black penis?

¹ Trailing m's and n's tend to be used interchangeably in both the Mayan language and by the Spanish speakers of Yucatan: minaan tends towards minaaam, Cancun tends towards Cancum and Juan towards Juam.

Girls: Titter titter titter.

MO: Hah tun. Hach bix u kaba u cahal?

Really. What exactly is the name of his town?

DB: What is the name of your town?

Tom: Arlington which is near Lexington.

DB: Arlington nakaan ti Lexington.

Arlington which is near Lexington.

MO: Bixi? Al in ton? Leo in ton?

How's that? My penis is heavy? Lick my penis?

Girls, but louder: Titter titter titter.

MO: Tuux cu bin xoc?

Where does he go to school?

DB: Where do you go to college?

Tom: Right now I am at Burlington College in Vermont but I hope to transfer to George Washington University in Washington, D.C. so I can take courses which will prepare me for State Department work.

DB: Beyora tu bin xoc ti humppel colegio ichil u cahal Burlington pero tac u bin xoc ti humppel universidad ichil u noh cah Washington.

Right now he goes to a college in the town of Burlington but he wants to go to a university in the city of Washington.

MO: Bixi??? Bul in ton? Baxal in ton? Machiz! Bucaah ton yan ti Estados Jodidos!² Yan in han bin telo!

How's that? Gamble with my penis?³ Play with my penis? Wow! How many penises there are in the U.S.! I really have to go there!

With that everyone burst out laughing except poor Tom who doesn't understand what is going on. "Why are they all laughing?" "Well, when I have time I will tell you."

Interestingly enough, both Tom and his sister later made trips to Kom Cheen to visit with their host families, once with their parents in tow, something none of the other students ever did.

² Literally: "Fucked-up States".

³ There are various meanings to the verb root **bul** / **buul**. Another possible meaning in this context is "submerged".